Nepal 1990

BILL O'CONNOR

Most of the news from Nepal in the spring was about politics, not peaks. The growing pro-democracy movement, centred naturally on Kathmandu and Pokhara, resulted in rebellion and the spilling of a great deal of blood by the military and police that was barely reported by the British media. A few pre-monsoon expeditions were effected, trying to get in and out of Kathmandu whilst a curfew was enforced to keep westerners off the streets. Trekking companies reported a slight drop in business as 'mail order mountaineers' fearful for their safety opted to stay away. However, by the time the post-monsoon season ended, a fear both of flying and falling had been overcome, resulting in the busiest climbing season ever in the Nepal Himalaya. In all 78 expeditions visited the country, with a total of 553 climbers more or less active. This represents a 30% increase over the 1989 post-monsoon season.

Predictably, established routes on 8000ers attracted the most attention. Most ascents were repeats of established routes and have been well documented in magazines.

Everest Records

A somewhat dubious record was set on Everest. Between 4 and 7 October no fewer than 31 climbers reached the summit via the South Col route, with over 100 waiting in the Western Cwm! Marc Batard was the only climber in 1990 to reach the summit without supplementary oxygen; this during his failed attempt to climb both Everest and Lhotse within 24 hours. In all, eight nations reached the top, and the successful included the youngest-ever summiteer: 17-year-old French schoolboy Jean Noël Roche, accompanied by his father Bertrand and a brace of married couples – Mr and Mrs Stremfelj from Yugoslavia and American Cathrine Gibson with her Russian husband Aleksei Krasnokutsky.

Lhotse South Face Solo

What Messner dubbed the 'problem for the year 2000' was climbed solo without 'tinned air' by Tomo Cesen. This undoubtedly represents a significant breakthrough in contemporary Himalayan climbing and was the most notable achievement of the year. Sadly, some French alpinists and media have, for no apparent reason other than sour grapes, tried to cast doubt on Cesen's ascent. However, other leading activists including Profit, Beghin and Escoffier have spoken out strongly in favour of Cesen.

Lhotse's South Face, the world's highest, has been the setting of successive attempts, sieges and failures over many years. Undoubtedly, its time

had come, for during the post-monsoon season a large Soviet team succeeded in making a second ascent of the face by a new line, using siege tactics and oxygen. Evidently the Soviets are keen to build on their mammoth successes on Everest and more recently Kangchenjunga.

Cho Oyu (8201m) and Xixabangma (8027m)

Voytek Kurtyka, Jean Troillet and Erhard Loretan made an early and fast ascent of the previously unclimbed 2000m SW face of Cho Oyu between 19 and 20 September. On 2 and 3 October the same trio climbed the S face of Xixabangma via a couloir to the right of the Yugoslav pillar, in a single 18-hour push.

Trekking Peaks

There has been an increase in the numbers climbing the so-called Trekking Peaks. For years these 18 summits have been neglected by all but the trekking agencies and a few *cognoscenti* like Jeff Lowe for whom small has meant both beautiful and a crop of technical first ascents. Undoubtedly the publication of Bill O'Connor's definitive guide to the peaks has focused attention on their unclimbed possibilities, their relative cheapness and their lack of organizational red tape. The fact that the MEF and BMC are willing to grant-aid 'expeditions' with worthwhile projects on Trekking Peaks has also stimulated a little interest.

Illegal Ascents

Several accidents and at least one fatality to a Briton attempting to climb without a permit occurred last year. Alpine and solo attempts on trekking and other peaks have been increasing, and the temptation to have a go without the bother of getting a permit is very strong, particularly when the climb can be completed in days or perhaps hours. I have spoken to the Minister at the Nepal Mountaineering Association, and they are perfectly aware that illegal ascents occur and have hinted at measures being taken against an offender's national organization or fellows.

Peaks, Permits and £'s

Permits for Trekking Peaks have always been issued to all applicants without it resulting in any real problems. The majority of permits are in any case granted to trekking agencies, inevitably for commercial groups; Island Peak, Mera Peak and Tent Peak being the most popular. Permits for the 108 expedition peaks were previously granted, we were led to believe, on a first-come, first-served basis; one permit for a particular route up the mountain being granted for a given season. However, a recent change in this policy has resulted in multiple permits being granted for the same peak and route at the same time. Obviously the Nepalese wish to increase their hard cash income from their finest asset, and this is the simplest and quickest way of doing that. On many mountains it has little effect, since the majority of peaks on the list hardly earn their keep. On the other hand, Everest, Makalu, Dhaulagiri, Ama Dablam, Pumori and a handful of the 'sexy' summits attract a lot of applications, with the result that Base Camp can now be occupied by several expeditions. It was reported that seven

groups queued for the NE ridge of Dhaulagiri, that another seven teams were encamped at the small tarn below the SW ridge of Ama Dablam, and that no less than 12 expeditions were active on Pumori.

Despite the Minister reminding me that climbing was about camaraderie, I had to inform him that rivalry had always been an essential motivator in mountaineering. Certainly my own experience on Ama Dablam in 1989 was that two expeditions on a route that was well defined and with limited camps leads to problems, perhaps the kind seen on K2 a few years ago. The unacceptable alternative suggested at the NMA was that perhaps expeditions would like to pay more for the privilege of exclusivity?

Józef Nyka adds:

On 23 and 24 April Krzysztof Wielicki soloed a new route on the E face of Dhaulagiri (8167m) to 7800m, descending by a previously equipped descent route. The new route lies to the left of the 1980 Kurtyka–MacIntyre route.